

Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Attitudes in English Language Learning

Fátima de la Luz Hernández Salinas

University of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, MEXICO
Division of Social Sciences and Humanities

Received: 31 May 2024 ▪ Revised: 14 August 2024 ▪ Accepted: 22 October 2024

Abstract

The process of any language learning is a complex construction of objectives. Any goal is influenced by internal or external factors such as motivation, culture, previous experiences, attitudes, etc. This study aims to recognize and understand the distinct learners' attitudes during their learning progress. This research is conducted as a case study. The inquiry tool for its mediation is an interview. The interview was directed in a face-to-face modality to collect and discuss the obtained results. In this study, positive and negative language attitudes of five English learners from a Language Department. Furthermore, the findings show that the learners share similar perceptions, attitudes, and experiences in their learning processes. The relevance of the findings contribute to the pedagogical implication in an EFL classroom happens.

Keywords: language learning attitudes, cognitive attitudes, affective attitudes, behavioral attitudes.

1. Introduction

Language learning attitudes are a vital dimension to understanding the language learning process (Dogan & Tuncer, 2020). In the EFL context, the attitudes can modify the learners' perceptions towards the learning and the language itself. Also, language attitudes can determine distinctive affections that bring beneficial or nonbeneficial learning outcomes. With these outcomes, learners' attitudes can be negatively or positively affected, and they bring strategies to reach their learning objectives (Rahman, Jalaluddin, Kasim & Darmi, 2021).

This study aims to identify the language learning attitudes of university students in their English language process. The derived findings of this study are efforts to contribute to the EFL field. The contribution explores diverse and similar points of view toward English learning. And how it affects their language competence. It is crucial to highlight the focus of this study; it is based on exploring and understanding attitudes in its three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral.

To conduct the study, I will first provide a brief literature review of prime concepts such as attitudes and their three dimensions. Then, I present the methodology I followed to conduct the investigation. And I provide the obtained results with its critical discussion. Finally, I offer a conclusion concerning the results.

© **Authors.** Terms and conditions of Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) apply.

Correspondence: Fátima de la Luz Hernández Salinas, University of Guanajuato, Division of Social Sciences and Humanities, Guanajuato, MEXICO.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Language learning attitudes*

The following section will address the theoretical framework of this study. The information below will have a relevant role to understand and comprehend the determined cases in the study.

According to Garrett (2007), an attitude refers to the pleasant or non-pleasant disposition towards a situation, object, or agreement. Also, an attitude can make someone act towards something (Le & Le, 2022). An attitude within the field of language learning is the tendency to act positively or negatively toward the aspects that involve any language learning (Zulfikar, Dahliana & Sari, 2019). The pleasant or positive attitudes in the language learning process improve the English language outcomes, while the negative ones affect the process because of failure (Le & Le, 2002). These authors exposed a relevant fact about an attitude. It is individual. When attitudes arise in a question, the study object will focus on one single individual performance, for example, what the individual thinks about the English language or how the individual perceives the language. Also, the attitudes are mainly associated with behaviors because of the definition these authors provided. Ahmed (2015) expressed that attitudes in language learning are feelings, beliefs, and behavior tendencies towards the language learning. In addition, attitudes have a “tripartite structure” (Garrett et al., 2003: 3). Attitudes involve three relevant dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral components.

2.2 *Cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes*

Cognitive attitudes refer to the beliefs about the context it is around (Garrett, Coupland & Williams, 2003). Also, the cognitive dimension is associated with the ideas or opinions of something (Zulfikar et al., 2019). Dogan and Tuncer (2020) stated that this dimension tends to be complex to describe. They exposed that cognitive attitudes consist of thoughts and knowledge of an individual to a particular object. However, a relevant fact about this dimension is that it can be shaped and modified. According to Garrett (2007), the cognitive component is highly influenced by societies. The stereotypes influence the point of view of that object. In language learning, the dimension comprehends the perception of the language itself and the situation where it is involved in the language.

The affective component is also known as the emotional dimension. It refers to the experienced feeling toward something (Zulfikar et al., 2019). Also, the negative and positive dispositions are the principal affective attitudes it can be found in a situation (Dogan & Tuncer, 2020). These authors stated that the emotional dimension within language learning is the acceptance of the language itself, the teacher or class, or vice versa. They presented relevant affective factors in which individuals may have different attitudes. The most meaningful factor is the English as a Foreign Language (EFL). What the individual feels about language learning in an environment where the target language is not around can lead to acceptance or not the learning. The following factor is related to the personality. When the individual possesses a capacity to be social, actively participate, and take risking skills is more likely that the individual constructs a positive attitude toward the language. The final factor is the social impact. It is constructed due to the language role in current societies.

The behavioral dimension is characterized by the individual's action towards something (Dogan & Tuncer, 2020). In language learning, the learner's action is meaningful to identify a positive or negative attitude toward the learning process. Furthermore, the behavioral component links to the decision-making of the individual. The different actions learners execute affect positively or negatively to their language performance.

In general, the three components are vital to the understanding of the learning process and performance of an individual. Rott (2002) offers the interrelation of the three dimensions of attitudes (as cited in Daggol, 2017: 258). He stated that thoughts (cognitive attitude) affect (emotional attitude) behaviors (Daggol, 2017). Also, it can be seen from another perspective. For example, behaviors affect thought. Or the emotions affect thoughts and behaviors. All three components are connected, and they can determine an attitude.

3. Methodology

As a main objective, I want to know their perspectives and beliefs, and what they think about learning English as a foreign language according to the different needs of their belonging studies contexts. Therefore, the research question is:

What are the attitudes of the university students towards English language learning in the Language Department at the University of Guanajuato?

The study required the attitudes identification towards learning situations of English learners. Therefore, the study is qualitative because it looks at learner's attitudes and understanding. The qualitative paradigm highlights the distinctive daily life events to give a meaning or explanation (Muzari, Shava & Shonhiwa, 2022). The learning attitudes are constructed according to the diverse scenarios and events the participants lived when learning English. One of the purposes of using a qualitative paradigm is to understand those experiences people have. And as a researcher, those experiences and units of meaning generate theories (Kamal, 2019).

According to Hood (2009), a case study focuses on one single character such as school, student, institution, or organization. In this study, the subject matter are the learning attitudes of different English learners. The author stated that an intrinsic case study focuses on understanding a distinct event that does not generalize to others. In this study, the participant experience is not generalized to the rest of the cases and is far from other studies. Also, according to Heale and Twycross (2017), a case study could have different cases on one single issue. It is case study research and highlights the differences and similarities between the events. In this case, participants' experiences are compared as a multiple-case scenario.

3.1 Context and participants

The context where the study took place was the city of Guanajuato. The study was developed in the English language department of the University of Guanajuato. To conduct the study was necessary to find five students with an intermediate progress inside the institution.

The participants for this study were five men. Three of them were 22 years old, and two were 23 years old. The similar characteristics they have are they are Mexican, they study BA programs at the University of Guanajuato, and they learn English as a foreign language at a 400 level at the language department of the University of Guanajuato. Three participants have been studying English since middle school stage as a subject in the grade. Two participants had their first English learning contact in the language Department. According to their bachelor programs, three students belong to the Architecture program, one studies Civil Engineering, and one studies Computational Systems. The participation was voluntary, and participants were required to sign a consent form in which they were aware of their rights to participate, to withdraw their participation any time, and that their identity was protected.

3.2 Instrument

According to Talmy (2010), interviews are used for qualitative studies about beliefs, perceptions, and experiences of a situation. This study attempts to know the attitudes of English learners. As the main purpose of the study is to work with people, the interviews allow us to collect the perceptions regarding what people have experienced and how the phenomena to study could impact them (Buriro, Awan & Lanjwani, 2017). It was necessary to have flexibility within the interview to ask for more information and clarification. A semi-structured interview allows one to ask more questions than those already structured (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi & Syam, 2022). I designed a semi-structured interview because I wanted to know the experiences while learning English. I applied the interview first by looking for intermediate students in the language department who were able to answer a face-to-face interview. When the interview took place, I recorded the voice to be transcribed after. The conducted interview was in Spanish, but the responses were translated into English for the data analysis.

3.3 Data processing and analysis

This study followed a thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis refers to a method for qualitative studies. This analysis involves the interpretation of qualitative sources from part of the researcher (MacQueen & Namey, 2011). These authors stated that the collected data identifies a sector called “themes” and later “codes”. Codes show the most meaningful and relevant data (Braun & Clarke, 2017). One of the best advantages that thematic analysis has is the appropriate and less effort management of the complex source of data (Guest et al., 2011). The collected data is processed in two different levels: macro and micro. The procedure of the macro consisted of the collection of relevant data for the study. Then, the data is coded with an initial theme connected with literature. Then, a final interpretation expounds what participants expressed without changing the meaning. And a final identification of the data. The micro level consisted of the defined code and the interpretation. Then, the identification that corresponds to the units of meaning within the code. In this study, I processed one macro-level table for each participant.

4. Results

The data collected from the interview revealed vital information about student’s attitudes toward English language learning. The discussion the results will be divided into the three types of existent learning attitudes: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.

4.1 Cognitive attitudes

The information gathered related to cognitive attitudes was coded into two themes: Beliefs of the importance of English in their contexts, and students’ reason for learning English. The information below states the data and its discussion.

4.1.1 Beliefs of the importance of English in their contexts

The interview responses showed that all the participants consider English as a fundamental language and tool for their professional fields and working contexts. Two participants expressed the following:

It is important in the academic, university and work environment because you can get a better job with a good salary and have a better life in the future (DL_1).

Job opportunities, getting foreign clients or working abroad, travel and tourism facilitator within the architectural profession (FP_1).

These quotes represent that English is important to gain access to a better job and life. The participants showed a positive attitude toward the English learning. They attribute a possible effective professional development thanks to the language. Also, most of the participants consider that English is a vital tool to communicate, as follows:

Language remains fundamental, access to information and education is widely used within the architectural community, as many publications, books and research are only available in English (FP_1).

From the fact of socializing and getting to know new places or people is like my objective or the context in which I would like to be (DR_1).

The data indicates that English allows the opportunity to communicate and understand contexts where the participants aspire to be. Within their working fields, the participants expressed the use of sources of information they need to read and work on. The participants keep a positive perspective for learning English due to the wide opportunities where they can use the language as a communicative facilitator. The importance of English learning employs the personal reasons why the participants study the language.

4.1.2 Students' reasons for learning English

The results showed most of the participants believed English gives a great gate to information and skills they will use in their professional fields, for example:

It is fundamental for my academic and professional development and gives me the possibility to connect with people and information resources around the world (FP_2).

In addition, it is a fundamental requirement for jobs that are about my career (CG_2).

The information represents the facility the participants will have to work in different contexts using the language. This facility creates a positive perspective about the language learning, because for the participants it is crucial to connect with people around the world. The objective of connecting and establishing communication abroad is reached with the language. Also, most of the participants expressed English as a universal language, and it makes it attractive to learn, as follows:

It is because I have always had the intention of learning another language, and English is the universal language (CG_2).

I am very interested in it, I like that thanks to it we can communicate almost everywhere in the world (JC_2).

The data collected suggests that one of the main reasons to learn English is for the language position in the world. Participants get motivation due to the fundamental role of English in many places in the world. Furthermore, the participants expressed that learning another language was part of their personal goals. Also, all the participants agreed that the main reason why they are studying English at the Language Department is to fill the academic credits and they can graduate from their programs, as follows:

The fact that I am studying architecture requires me to take at least six levels of English (DR_2).

I have to accredit level six in order to graduate (DL_2).

These two quotations attribute English learning to an academic outcome. The interview results of this section suggest the reasons for studying English are mainly associated with academic and professional fulfillment in the University of Guanajuato.

4.2 Emotional attitudes

The collected data for emotional attitudes was coded in one major category: feelings in learning English. It is presented below.

4.2.1 Feelings in learning English

The participants in the study showed emotions of frustration and stress during an intermediate stage while learning English. The majority of the participants felt that English turns more difficult when levels progress. For example, two of them expressed the following:

At first it was light, as the levels went on it became interesting, but it stressed me out at times (DL_3).

I have had a mixture of emotions. First the enthusiasm to start learning it and then comes the hard part which is the frustration (FP_3).

The data indicated that the participants experienced a series of stressful situations when they started to learn more English. It can be suggested that a process which is in constant knowledge accumulation is difficult when it progresses. Also, other participants commented on the same responses, as follows:

During the stage where I felt that I was already learning the language, it was frustrating, because I was less able to understand all the topics (DR_3).

It is stressful, because you are not going to remember all the things and topics at the same time (CG_3).

These quotes showed that with more English language knowledge, it is more difficult to retain information, and apply the language. By feeling frustrated, they show a negative emotional response toward the English learning process. However, two participants welcomed the opportunity to focus on a positive emotional response. They reported the following:

Sometimes the satisfying moments come because you start to see the progress you are making (FP_3)

And now I feel more motivated. I feel happy because I understand more words and I am more encouraged to speak it (CG_3)

Even though most of the participants experienced a negative feeling while learning English, they also experienced satisfactory moments when they realized their English language progress. Taking together both feelings, the study suggests an association between positive and negative responses toward English learning. It can be inferred that the English learning process produces negative emotions, while the learning result produces positive ones.

4.3 Behavioral attitudes

Behavioral attitudes were categorized into two main themes: effective language learning strategies and self-schedule to learn English. The data is presented below.

4.3.1 Effective language learning strategies

In exploring the behavioral student's attitudes, it was found similar effective strategies during their learning process. All the participants indicated the use of multimedia to learn English, for example:

With apps, movies, music in English, podcasts that you find in Spotify (FP_4).

80% of the content I consume is in English, e.g. memes, videos, movies, series, readings, school research (JC_4).

The information indicates a positive use of multimedia to learn English. Also, it can be suggested that the use of different sources for practicing English is a motivating factor. They stated that these strategies are used for daily life, and the strategies allow extensive contact with the language and a better performance with their formal learning, as follows:

I started reading and doing exercises (DL_4).

Going to the self-learning center because the teachers are there all day, and it helps me to practice my skills and on the other hand entering the language department (JC_4).

The data can be thus suggested that formal English learning with language learning strategies for daily use has a positive and motivating impact on the student's performance. The participants may keep a positive attitude towards negative feelings, such as stress while learning while learning English. Also, the combination of both types of learning can help them balance the unfavorable reactions.

4.3.2 Self-schedule to learn English

Final information obtained from the interview was the formal learning of each participant. The responses are addressed in relation to the previous theme of effective learning strategies. All the participants agreed with the five hours in the Language Department of the University of Guanajuato. In addition, most participants reported the following information:

In the self-study center six hours (JC_5).

And coming out of my classes when I have time, or on weekends I study one hour on Saturday and another one on Sunday and I do it continuously before entering my classes or I see the things I saw in that subject to have a better memory (DL_5).

Therefore, this information suggests that autonomy outside the classroom allows the participants to perform the language effectively. Their self-schedule allows them to take advantage and benefit from their formal learning at the Language Department. Also, the responses demonstrated they spent several hours on their learning. The information also suggests that the participants pay special attention to learning English on their own.

Overall, these results indicate that the participants in this study shared a similar experience learning English in the language department. They showed positive and common attitudes towards the reasons why they learn English. Also, they stated beneficial strategies to learn the language outside the classroom and to keep motivated to learn it. Finally, the participants expressed the negative feelings in the learning time-lapse.

5. Conclusions

The present study was conducted to identify the students' attitudes towards English language learning in the language department of the University of Guanajuato. One of the most significant findings is the relation between the positive attitudes the participants have developed toward the learning process and the positive performance in their learning. The study explored

the different dimensions that belong to learning attitudes: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral attitudes. The relevance of cognitive attitudes was attributed to the reasons of participants to study English. All the participants showed an interest in the language and a tool to graduate from their BA programs. Most of the participants perceived English as a valuable tool for their future professional fields. Emotional attitudes revealed that all the participants experienced a negative feeling when the language class advanced. Most of the participants had difficulty remembering all the knowledge when the English level was moving forward. The importance of behavioral attitudes is attributed to the autonomous strategies the participants implement to learn the language by themselves. All the students employed music, podcasts, movies, series, and other sources of input to improve their English language. Overall, the similar views, experiences and strategies the participants faced in their learning process are assigned to positive and some negative attitudes.

An implication of the study is the possibility that the participants at the University of Guanajuato perceive the language as valuable for their future professional fields. This research offers a framework for the exploration of how the different contexts of English learners influence their attitudes and perceptions of the language and the process of learning it. The pedagogical application suggests strategies to foster positive attitudes toward English learning. The application is a possible continuation of the study or future research.

Finally, two important limitations need to be considered. First, the sample size is limited to only six participants out of hundreds at the University of Guanajuato. Also, the data collection was done with only one instrument, and vital information cannot be collected using one. Further research is required to explore the same topic but with a high sample size of English learners and using more instruments to collect data.

In conclusion, the study contributed to the field of English teaching and learning practices. It is suggested that English teachers should be aware of how the different learning attitude dimensions impact the students' language performance. Knowing why the learners are studying the language and how it makes them feel can be effective in employing strategies and achieving a plainer learning process.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2015). Attitudes towards English language learning among EFL learners at UMSKAL. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(18), 6-16.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). *Thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Buriro, A., Awan, J., & Lanjwani, A. (2017). Interview: A research instrument for social science researchers. *International Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education*, 1(4), 1-14.
- Daggol, G. (2017). Language learning attitudes: Ingrained or shaped in time? *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*, 5(3), 257-275. <https://doi.org/10.18298/ijlet.2029>

- Dogan, Y., & Tuncer, M. (2020). The role of attitudes in foreign language learning. *Academic Studies in Foreign Language Education*, 83.
- Garrett, P., Coupland, N., & Williams, A. (2003). *Investigating language attitudes: Social meanings of dialect, ethnicity and performance*. University of Wales Press.
- Garrett, P. (2007). Language attitudes. In *The Routledge companion to sociolinguistics*, 116-121.
- Guest, G., MacQueen, M., & Namey, E. (2011). *Applied thematic analysis*. Sage publications.
- Heale, R., & Twycross, A. (2017). What is a case study? *Evidence-based nursing*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/eb-2017-102845>
- Hood, M. (2009). Case study. In Heigham, J., Croker, R.A. (Eds.), *Qualitative research in applied linguistics*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230239517_4
- Kamal, S. (2019). Research paradigm and the philosophical foundations of a qualitative study. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 1386-1394. <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.43.13861394>
- Le, X., & Le, T. (2022). Factors affecting students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language in a tertiary institution of Vietnam. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 2(2), 168-185. <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.22229>
- Muzari, T., Shava, G., & Shonhiwa, S. (2022). Qualitative research paradigm, a key research design for educational researchers, processes and procedures: A theoretical overview. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 14-20.
- Rahman, A., Jalaluddin, I., Kasim, Z., & Darmi, R. (2021). Attitudes towards learning English among the Aliya Madrasah students in Bangladesh. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 269-280. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v11i2.34121>
- Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, S., Alhabsyi, F., & Syam, H. (2022). Semi-structured interview: A methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies. *Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 12(1), 22-29.
- Talmy, S. (2010). Qualitative interviews in applied linguistics: From research instrument to social practice. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 30, 128-148. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190510000085>
- Zulfikar, T., Dahliana, S., & Sari, R. (2019). An exploration of English students' attitude towards English learning. *English Language Teaching Educational Journal*, 2(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.12928/eltej.v2i1.947>

